

# ***The Florida Times-Union***

Saturday, May 25, 2002

## **Legal Aid in Clay County Could Get a Boost**

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People who are most in need of a lawyer's help in Clay County often are the ones who can least afford it. That's when Jacksonville Area Legal Aid Inc. steps in to fill the gap.

But even though Legal Aid lawyers provide legal services to thousands of indigent clients in Northeast Florida, including hundreds a year in Clay County, the needs of many others go unmet due to budgetary constraints and staffing limitations.

With only one lawyer and one paralegal in its Clay County branch office in Green Cove Springs, the non-profit agency handled more than 300 cases last year, said Michael Figgins, executive director. But for every client who received help fighting negligent landlords, abusive husbands or federal benefit program administrators, four others did not.

"Study after study shows unmet needs to be about 80 percent," he said.

The ability to handle more cases is about to take a big jump, however, as a result of an increase in revenue from fees charged for every civil action filed in court in Clay County. The County Commission has endorsed a request to boost the filing fee from \$10 to \$25 and could approve an ordinance as early as Tuesday to implement the fee hike.

"Currently, we spend about \$250,000 a year in Clay County, which is about 8 percent of our budget," said Figgins, adding that Clay County clients also represent about 8 percent of the total "poverty population" served by Legal Aid last year in Duval, Baker, Nassau and Clay counties.

The additional revenue from higher court-filing fees will total about \$60,000 a year, of which approximately \$40,000 will be spent on salary for an additional lawyer to assist Gloria Einstein, who has been the only Legal Aid lawyer in Clay County for many years.

The only way to get a lawyer so cheaply will be to find one with limited experience, or perhaps one fresh out of law school with a strong desire to "provide justice to low-income people," Figgins said.

Legal Aid handles only civil cases. Child custody and domestic violence cases, housing discrimination, divorce, consumer fraud and Social Security and Medicare entitlements make up the majority of the agency's case load.

The last time court filing fees were increased in Clay County to help fund the program was in 1998, when commissioners approved an increase from \$5 to \$10.

Of the more than 300 Legal Aid cases in Clay last year, roughly 40 percent involved women who had been abused by violent husbands and were seeking divorces, Figgins said. Most of the women were referred to Legal Aid by Quigley House, Clay County's sexual assault and domestic violence center.

In domestic violence situations involving married clients, the victims need to legally sever their marital relationship with their abusive spouses in order to move on with their lives, Figgins said, and Jacksonville Area Legal Aid provides the expertise to accomplish that.

Sharon Youngerman, executive director of Quigley House, said about 75 percent of the women who come to her agency in search of help have children. But most have no financial resources, which is why so many remain in abusive situations for years.

"Everyone asks why does she stay in the abusive situation," Youngerman said. "Well, if she can't get a divorce she doesn't have any kind of legal paperwork that would require him to support her [and their children]."

The services Legal Aid provides, she said, are critical to helping indigent victims of domestic violence achieve the freedom they need to start their lives over and begin to recover from years of physical and psychological trauma.

"Very few of our clients have the financial resources to do this on their own," Youngerman said. "Generally, if they had the resources they don't need shelter and they can afford private counseling."